

Op-ed
Fixing FEMA?
Eric E. Holdeman, Director
King County Office of Emergency Management

Should the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) be bulldozed and remade from scratch, like thousands of homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, or are there good bones in the agency that could support a major remodel and upgrade? This is the challenge facing Congress and the multiple committees struggling with how to improve the nation's emergency management system.

It was eleven months ago that I penned an op-ed to the Washington Post about how FEMA was being destroyed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The Post held the Op-ed and it was released on August 30th as the flood waters from the broken levees were not only destroying New Orleans, but also annihilating the myth of how prepared our nation was for a large scale disaster.

Since then, study after study has been done on Katrina and who did or did not do their job. The White House, Senate, and House have all done their independent studies, along with numerous GAO reports. Today on the Hill there is a fight brewing as to what course of action to take to fix our federal approach to emergency management. Here are the options and a suggested solution.

The first option is to reestablish FEMA as a separate cabinet agency with the same authorities and organization it had in the Clinton Administration.. Although this initially appealed to the emergency manager in me, since I have fond memories of a professionally led FEMA, but the world has changed significantly in the last five years.

Romanticism aside, reestablishing an independent FEMA would be problematic in many ways. None of the above would be in place and we'd be starting from scratch with all new leadership and foisting the organization on an administration that does not want it. How would the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) fit into the equation? Would there be turf battles between a natural hazard-focused FEMA and a terrorism-focused DHS? Also, taking FEMA out of DHS without fixing the existing problems with grant administration will spell trouble for state and local agencies. Despite these issues, one house committee is recommending this option for the future.

In contrast, there are those in the Senate who would push the humpty dumpty FEMA off the wall and piece it back together again with many good reforms to the organization, but also with a new name. The goal of this re-branding effort is to rebuild the confidence of the American people in their federal government. However it will only serve to confuse emergency responders and the public as to

who we are talking about.. We need to fix the FEMA product, not the FEMA name.

There is another effort being led by Washington State Congressman Dave Reichert in the House Select Homeland Security Committee. This committee-drafted bill takes a multi-pronged approach to the issues facing FEMA. I had the opportunity to testify before the committee in support of the bill, which has several key provisions. It keeps FEMA in DHS, but restores disaster preparedness to the agency; it once again combines the function of emergency preparedness with disaster response and recovery; it supports an "All-Hazards" approach to funding emergency management and disaster preparedness; and it retains the FEMA name.

There are three reasons why I believe the committee members are on the right path with this bill. For starters, they have taken a "bottom-up" approach to crafting the bill by reaching out to fire, police and emergency managers to get their input on what needs to be fixed and how. Seeking that invaluable input shows me they are not about finding political cover, but finding solutions.

Secondly, it is a bipartisan bill, something that is rare these days in Washington, D.C. The make-up of the committee itself, which draws its membership from committee chairs, makes it unique and collaborative - another rarity in today's federal legislative process.

Finally, they have cut through the politics, blame placing, and finger-pointing to come up with a very good bill that improves our nation's collective ability to respond to disasters. While not perfect, it can still do much of what's needed: fix FEMA and our national emergency system so that its dedicated professionals can better serve the public when it matters most.

Yes I'm still nostalgic for the FEMA of old, but we have to move on, and use the successes of the past as guideposts for the future.

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The writer is director of the King County, Wash., Office of Emergency Management